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## U.S. Faces Battle on Sealing Off Reactor

By JOHN RATHER

Two Long Island congressmen and the top official at the Brookhaven National Laboratory said last week that they will oppose a tentative Energy Department plan to seal off for 87,000 years the radioactive material at the lab's closed but still highly contaminated Brookhaven Graphite Research Reactor.

The projected length of time security and monitoring would be needed at the site, far longer than Long Island has existed and ending early in the 890th century, stunned some members of a lab-created community advisory council when the proposal first came before them.

"Are these people kidding?" said Richard Amper, the executive director of the Long Island Pine Barrens Society and a council member. "I was looking for Rod Serling or Allen Funt."

Michael Holland, an Energy Department official, said that the proposal, which would save the government tens of millions of dollars in short-term cleanup and disposal costs, was far from final. "This is extremely preliminary," said Mr. Holland, the department's area manager at the lab. "What you are seeing is just the very early stages of a very public process."

Other options still under consideration but not given preferred status include removing most of the radioactive material off-site for \$40 million and removing everything, including the reactor building, to restore the site to "greenfield" status for \$96 million.

But the congressmen, Democrats Tim Bishop of Southampton and **Steve Israel** of Huntington, said last week that they would not wait to move against the long-term management option and were seeking to enlist other members of the Long Island delegation in foreclosing on it.

"In my personal view, 87,000 years is not an option when there are better options available," said Mr. Israel following an emergency meeting of the community advisory panel he and Mr. Bishop convened at the laboratory last Monday.

Mr. Bishop, whose district includes the 5,300-acre Energy Department laboratory, said he

and Mr. Israel would assure that "the decision we make is one that we can collectively support and not one that is driven by financial considerations."

The laboratory director, Praveen Chaudhari, joined in taking exception to the long-term management option. "I am not in favor of it," Dr. Chaudhari said in a telephone interview. "I believe that the radioactive material, given its long life, is best removed and kept in a safe place."

"We have a number of these sites across the country where it would be safe in the sense that it is secure and it can decay over its natural lifetime," he said.

Mr. Holland said the 87,000-year estimate was the time required for the decay of the longest-lived radionuclide in the reactor, identified by the lab as carbon-14.

The air-cooled graphite reactor, the first research reactor in the country, operated from 1950 to 1969 to produce neutrons used in scientific research but had operating problems and leaked radioactive materials into the soil and groundwater.

As part of a cleanup, the lab, which has been on the federal superfund list since 1989, has excavated contaminated soils from around the reactor building and shipped reactor fuel, cooling fans and a leaking underground sump off-site.

Radioactive material including graphite inside the reactor building is contained in a cube measuring 25 feet on each side, divided into two halves and composed of 70 layers of contaminated graphite blocks. The cube, referred to as a graphite pile, is surrounded by a shield consisting of an inner layer of 6 inches of steel plate, 51 inches of high-density concrete and an outer, 3-inch covering of steel plate.

Mr. Holland said that an Energy Department risk analysis concluded that the cube presented an extremely low risk to the public and the environment. Frederick Petschauer, a project manager at the laboratory, said a person would have to be encased in the cube for four days to receive a lethal dose of radiation. Radiation just outside the cube is very slightly above background levels for Long Island, the laboratory said.

Some other members of the community advisory council said the contamination was safely contained and should not be shipped elsewhere.

"Right now the material that is there is not causing any threat to the environment or to the public," said George Proios, chief environmental analyst in the administration of the Suffolk county executive, Robert J. Gaffney. "Can we assure it for thousands of years into the future? No. But can we assure it any better any other place?"

"It's a tough call," said Bill Smith, the executive director of Fish Unlimited on Shelter Island. "I don't really want to see it stay here, but from a moral standpoint I don't want to put it in somebody else's back yard."

The proposal to maintain the cube, the shield and the reactor building indefinitely is part of a new Energy Department initiative to prioritize and reduce cleanup costs at department-owned national laboratories, officials said. The department estimates the cost of maintaining the sealed reactor would be \$275,000 a year, or \$27.5 million over the minimum 100 years the Brookhaven laboratory was projected to remain in operation. Over 87,000 years the total (assuming zero inflation) would be nearly \$24 billion.

Mr. Israel said the implications for the cleanup at Brookhaven went beyond Long Island. He said the final plan at Brookhaven could become a model for other places.

"If the energy bill has \$28 billion in subsidies for big oil, then we should find \$96 million for a safe and sensible cleanup of B.G.R.R.," he said.

A final plan will need the approval of the Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department of Environmental Conservation under terms of an interagency agreement with the Energy Department that took effect in 1992.

Bonnie Bellow, a spokeswoman for the E.P.A. in New York, said her agency had not yet received a formal proposal from the Energy Department and could not comment. But she said the agency had "certainly raised concerns" in discussions with Energy Department officials.

Adrienne Esposito, the associate director of Citizens Campaign for the Environment in Farmingdale, said the proposal was an example of the Energy Department "being more concerned about the price tag than the public good."

Mary Joan Shea of the Huntington Breast Cancer Action Coalition said the group wanted all the contamination removed. "We feel like the Department of Energy is trying to push this through in a hurry and we don't consider this a cleanup plan," she said. "It sidesteps the major issue of leaving future generations to figure out and pay for something that they did not request or cause, and this is not responsible stewardship."

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